

Deirdre Johnson: September 15th... No, excuse me. April 15th of 2018, and I went to volunteer because I'd heard about it and I had been a member. And I was sitting there, I went early and I happened to... They were talking about state leads, and I said, "Well, where's one for Virginia?" And she says, "Would you like to be it?" And I was like, "Um... well... I guess so."

Deirdre Johnson: And so from there... While we were at the conference at Myrtle Beach, I happened to mention something about criminalization, or being from Virginia, and this woman, Tami Haught from Sero Project, that does criminalization of HIV on the national level, she runs over to the table and is like, "Hey, we have a case in Virginia, and we would love to have your help." Then from there, they sent me to Indianapolis to go to HIV Is Not a Crime. That's where I met my partner Dr. Cedric Pulliam. We're three people sitting around a table like... What's going on with Virginia where other states (they were separated by states) had big tables of folks, and we were only three for Virginia.

Speaker 2: Deirdre, can you tell us more, because we haven't heard anyone else talking about this infected sexual battery and what that's all about. And I think that would make an amazing addition to our oral histories.

Deirdre Johnson: With that, in Virginia, we have disclosure laws. So if you're HIV positive... and as well as have syphilis, hepatitis B... I'm trying to think of... There's one more. HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B, you have to disclose to your sexual partners that you have those things. If not, then you could be under either Class I misdemeanor or a felony charge. I think it's Class I. Class VI misdemeanor and a Class I felony, and that would mean a minimum of one year to five years in prison and/or a fine of \$2,500.

Speaker 2: So the battery just means that you didn't disclose; it doesn't have to do with rape or anything like that, right? It can be consensual, but if you don't know that your partner is positive.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Like if I choose to go out and have sexual relations with anyone and I don't disclose, they can go back if they find out that I'm HIV positive; they can then go and press a charge on me to say, "She didn't tell me." And at the moment it says intent, but we have to prove intent. So whether I was intending to transmit to them. So now we're trying to knock it to where we take out... We don't want to exclude folks that can't get to viral suppression because of the simple fact that they may or may not be in a healthy, happy, or safe environment. Whether they're homeless, the economic justice, they don't have enough money, or whatever the case may be; they may not even want to choose, but they're doing the best that they can for themselves. So we don't want them to be...

Speaker 2: Penalized the same way.

- Deirdre Johnson: Yes. Yes. Because it may be beyond their control as to why things are the way that they are.
- Speaker 3: So the policy that you're dealing with right now, can you tell us a little bit more about that one?
- Deirdre Johnson: Well, that one we just got a call out of the blue and it was like, "Hey, we want you to take a look at it." Alexandria Health Commission contacted us and now they're using us as a resource to possibly bring it up... not even to bring it up, but to bring it up.
- Speaker 2: You know, one of the things that we both find so fascinating about the St. Paul support group is that everyone seems to be involved in this huge, nationwide network having to do with HIV support, laws, medical issues. It's pretty amazing. Can you talk more about that?
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. What I'm learning is that HIV is... To me, I start to look at it as the wheel within the wheel. You have all of these different issues that come out of not just living with HIV, but just even as a human, but then having HIV adds on to that with the economic justice, criminalization of HIV, reproductive justice and rights, rights of women of trans experience... everything that could even... universal healthcare... It all ties back into, in one way, shape, or form, those of us that are living with HIV or dealing with those extra spokes that come in. Substance abuse, substance issues, anything like that. Mental health. And so wherever we have noticed that wherever our personal journeys have taken us is where we start to explore more and try to make a difference or change in that particular arena.
- Speaker 3: So take us back a bit, because you're [crosstalk 00:05:14] right now.
- Speaker 2: We want to hear about your journey.
- Speaker 3: Yeah. So first, what does it mean... For you, what does childhood look like for you growing up?
- Speaker 2: Family?
- Speaker 3: Are you here right? Or how did you get here? [inaudible 00:05:30] And then even to the point of your diagnosis too, right? Because we're also wondering, probably... Were you as this active, an activist, right?
- Speaker 2: Before [crosstalk 00:05:46]
- Speaker 3: Even before you were diagnosed, right?

Speaker 2: And do not worry about being linear, because what we're going to do is, we'll have a transcript made of the recording, and then we're going to be editing down what you say, so you can be here, there, and everywhere in your responses.

Deirdre Johnson: Well, trust me... It's funny, because as you bring that up I had to think about, was I an activist all my life? In a roundabout way, the answer is really yes. My parents are from Amelia, which is not too far from here. They're high school sweethearts. They're so cute. They're still married. I'm 44, so they've been married for 44 years.

Deirdre Johnson: My mom always loved to really point out just how amazing she is because at 18 she was pregnant, she was married and graduating in June. Got married in April. Don't know when the other process happened, but who knows? Before April. Got married in April, June she graduated, July she turned, I believe, 18, and then in August here I pop up. And then from there, we move into just my dad joined the military, so we ended up going all over the place.

Speaker 2: Army?

Deirdre Johnson: Yes, he joined the Army. One of his first duty stations was here in Fort Lee, and then we moved from there to Seattle. That's why I'm a Seattle Seahawks fan. Yay, go Seahawks! And we just traveled from city to city and about two years later my brother came into the world... Bless his little heart. Bless his... I love my brother. It's just the two of us.

Deirdre Johnson: We've been to Germany several times, almost every state in the United States, but we then... My dad's last duty station was in Ohio, and even in that process I remember going... I remember being in Germany when the Berlin Wall came down, and us talking about it at school, and I think I was about seven or nine years old at the most. My dad actually had to physically go to Berlin and help with whatever... I don't know what he actually did, but he was there, and he brought me back, and I still have it, this monkey from Berlin. It was just... Now in hindsight I see that we had to stay at home because they were worried because of where the housing was; it wasn't as closed of as it is now after this whole 9/11 stuff, so Germans would demonstrate in front, walking down the street with Reagan slurs and that kind of thing, knowing that we were from America. And we had to have scanners to check that they didn't leave bombs, and we had curfews. So even at seven, eight, I remember doing some and being aware of political awareness.

Deirdre Johnson: Then transitioning into high school, I was junior class president. I did a whole bunch; I was in the Latin Club; I did a lot of nerdy stuff. But I mean, nerds are absolutely cool; just, the thirst for knowledge was always there. I wanted to be a

pediatrician or obstetrician, gynecologist, one of the three. And I was really focused on medicine and trying to get prepared for medicine and knowing that I couldn't wait until my senior year to get prepared. So I did that, ran junior class president, was in the student government for different things. Did our homecoming, did some proms, did all of those things. So even then, my family now, my high school family...

Deirdre Johnson: There's five of us that still to this day, we talk at least once a week. And they keep me grounded, and they always say... They've been devastated, I have to be honest, that when HIV happened to me, they were devastated. Of all the people in the world who are not doing a billion negative things, just one particular situation happened and now you're living with HIV. But then they see that I don't let it overtake me; I overtake it. And that has just stemmed from how it all happened with HIV.

Deirdre Johnson: It happened, which, I want to make sure... I know you guys can't see this on video, but I want to show you this person, I will say. That's a picture of Kevin and me. That was back in the '90s.

Speaker 2: So are you still in high school at this point?

Deirdre Johnson: At this point, I am out of high school. This is [inaudible 00:10:35] graduated a cool nerd. I think I was 73 out of 438 in the class. Went to James Madison. There are James Madison, studied pre-med with a minor in psychology. Started dating one of the star basketball players there, hence then I ended up with my older son, who is now 22. And from there... Let's see, I had Savion in...

Deirdre Johnson: About two years later, I ended up somehow, somehow getting with this person. And from the beginning, it was a really abusive situation, and it was something I had never necessarily personally experienced for me. I had seen it in other spaces in my family, but hadn't necessarily had it directly happen to me, and it completely took me, my self esteem, my everything from me.

Speaker 2: Were you still in college at this point? How did you meet Kevin?

Deirdre Johnson: I was actually two years out of college. I was working for an organization called [inaudible 00:11:34] Incorporated as their assistant controller, and I happened to be out there with some other girl friends of mine, and they were out and they were drinking. And at the time, I wasn't drinking because I was actually pregnant at that time, and I said to them... They were going to drive from DC to Baltimore, and I was like, "No, I'm going to drive for you." And it just so happened the group of people that they were going to meet were your average thugs, if you will. And then some. Boys, the Dough Boys, whatever, they were big time drug dealers, and we went and I was the chauffeur.

Deirdre Johnson: And he actually walked across, and I just happened to look and was like, "Oh, he's cute." But the big man actually was sitting in a Suburban, and he actually motioned and sent Kevin over to tell me to get in the vehicle with him. Well, there was a female sitting in the passenger seat, and I was like, "Not just no, but hell no. That ain't happening." I said, "There's a female in the seat." "Well, I'm going to send her home." And this woman lived near DC, and we're in Baltimore. And it's like 12:00 at night. Are you serious? So in my mind, if you'll do it to her you'll do it to me. So no, I'm good. I'm taking care of my friends.

Deirdre Johnson: We ended up in this club, and as we were in the club Kevin walked up and was like, "Where's your boyfriend?" And I was like... Literally, I said this. I was a cocky person. I said, "He's in Minnesota making my money," and he was like, "What?" At the time, this was the person I was pregnant by, we worked together and he was actually working doing telecommunications in Minnesota. So I was trying to be thuggish and trying to say it in a way that didn't seem like it was, "Oh, how sweet" kind of thing. So I ignored him and just let it go, and that's the only thing I ever said to him all night.

Deirdre Johnson: A couple days later, my friends called me and were like, "Listen, he wants to go out with you. We're going on a double date to the movies." And I was like, "Eh, I'll tag along, but not really." And even at the movie theatre, first date... I'm a very sociable person, so I speak, and this gentleman walked past. And if I lock eyes with you, I'm going to say hi. It's just common courtesy, or just what I've been taught. And I spoke, and he just went off and was like, "What the fuck are you talking to them about? Do you know him?" And I was like, "Okay, note to self: this is why I'm tagging along and not really in for this process."

Deirdre Johnson: And it just... I don't know how we ended up... I went over to the friend's house again, he happened to be there, and then by this time I had lost the baby, so I was... I can't remember if I was drinking. I doubt it, because some way, somehow, we would have had to make it back to my place, so I don't know how that would have happened from DC to Virginia, which... My mind is now getting to the point where I can actually remember some of the stuff, because it's been so traumatic.

Deirdre Johnson: And we ended up... I know we ended up in my space, and I asked him to use a condom, and he was like, he's okay. Because I had found out throughout this process. I asked the question, "Who is he," and he said to me he was a trigger man, which on the streets means if you need somebody, he's got it. And I was like, "Another note to self: let's leave that alone." And he wouldn't do it, and I was like, "No." Even though it did happen, I still was present, but it was just like, "Eh, okay, this is the first and last time."

Deirdre Johnson: And then from there, that was probably about September of '98 and in some way by June of '99 we were in a relationship that I didn't want to be in, and he was abusive and had already put his hands on me at least three times. And to the point where my mom and dad actually lived about three blocks from the townhouse that I lived in, and my older son... because they had seen it within even the first few months... They literally would not allow my older son to be in the space, so they would come up with reasonings to come and pick him up and take him away. Then when they'd seen the black eye they were like, "Oh, hell no."

Deirdre Johnson: I ended up leaving by that time, the following August. That would have been August of '99. Yes, August of '99. No, I met him in September of '99; this would have been August of 2000, because at that point I remember being in the kitchen. I was cooking. It was a Wednesday. He's Puerto Rican, so I was cooking a couple Puerto Rican dishes. He says, "Babe, I'll be right back," and he never comes back. That was Wednesday.

Deirdre Johnson: He calls me Thursday morning and was like, "Look, they can't find me, but they know where you are." And so that was code for "Get the hell out of dodge," and I was literally at work, and I told them while I was sitting at work, "Tomorrow is my last day." Big dummy on my part. Had I stayed, at that time, my boss, the controller was actually having open heart surgery. And so he was at a point where they were just, within those couple of days all this stuff was happening. They're now saying, "Because he's not coming back, you're going to have to be the interim controller." So I was making about \$40,000, and had I stayed three more days... literally three more days... It would have been \$70,000. Single mom of one. It would have been perfect. But instead, just chasing after something... "some ding-a-ling" is what I normally say in all my speeches, but chasing after that I gave them one day's notice, packed up everything in my house. By Saturday morning, I was on my way to North Carolina and left my older son with my parents, telling them I would come back to get him.

Deirdre Johnson: When I went to North Carolina, I pull up to the house, the address he gave me, and he comes outside, rushes outside, and he says, "You can't come in the house." And I'm like... He's like, "They have a baby. There's a newborn baby in the house, and they just got the baby to sleep. So I'm going to go with you to get a hotel, so that we can stay at a hotel. No problem." It's very poignant and a whole lot of levels on that point, because it comes back to haunt me a lot later. Well, about a year later, barely.

Deirdre Johnson: We go to the hotel room, puts me in the hotel room. I couldn't look out the window, couldn't go out the doors, couldn't do anything unless he told me to, be he again was in that controlling situation. It was terrible. I mean, there's tons of extra stories I can add in to that.

Speaker 3: So he was doing that not because he was in trouble, but because he was trying to control you. Just to get that straight.

Speaker 2: Or both?

Deirdre Johnson: Both.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Deirdre Johnson: Both. And what I eventually found out is that he stole some drugs, and hence why he ran. And then if they happened to see me, then they would assume that he was somewhere close. But then that was... I think in my naïve denial as to what the explanation is, but it was really on the control issue. And not even to make calls to my family to let them know that I was okay and I was safe. Of course, I snuck and did that anyways, and I just remember hearing the concern in my dad's voice like, "My God, what am I going to do? And what can I do?" And I'm here, "Oh, it's going to be okay, Dad. It'll be all right."

Deirdre Johnson: We stayed there about a week, and he said, "Listen, if I stay here then I'm going to do the same things I was doing back in northern Virginia," which was selling the drugs. And I was like... Look. I didn't even know what was going on, because I had never experienced it; he never brought it home; he had never had deals in the home. I knew something extra was going on. He did have a job doing some construction stuff, but I knew he liked to hang out with a seedy crew, and so I just said, "None of that comes to my house," because I was always fearful for my son, and of course myself, but my son primarily.

Deirdre Johnson: From there, we left and we went to El Paso, Texas. Yay. Went to El Paso, and we stayed there at his aunt and uncle's house. His mom was there, and two cousins, and two of their children. Stayed in this little room, and about two weeks later we found a house, and we moved into the house. That would have been about October-ish, and I recognized I was pregnant. And I was like, "Crap." So we went through the whole process with social services, getting Medicare, Medicaid, because I had quit my job, everything. And go through this, find out I'm pregnant, and they send me to an OBGYN.

Deirdre Johnson: They do all the tests that they check out for, I'm pregnant, and he calls me back a couple days later and he was like, "Come in." The nurse says, "We need you to come in." I'm assuming literally, "Oh, it's just my anemia. I know it's no big deal. Just give me some iron." She was like, "No, we really need you to come in." And I walked into the office probably about two days later, and I wish I could remember his name... just as sweet as he could be. Terrified, bless his little heart. As I see it now, he was just terrified.

Deirdre Johnson: And I'm sitting on the table, but there's another table opposite of me, and he's got his back to me and he's reviewing the notes and he says, "Well, Ms. Johnson, do you do drugs?" And I was like... I never presented in any way, but okay. I said, "No, sir. Why?" He says, "Because you're HIV positive, and I can't understand why." And I was like, "You're kidding me." I knew what it meant, and just mainly of... I played basketball, too, in high school... because of Magic Johnson and him coming out in '94 and recognizing that it was something... and knowing a little bit, but not enough.

Deirdre Johnson: I said, "No, you're kidding. There's no way. I know how many partners I've had; I know how many have been unprotected encounters. I know this back and forth." Doctors, you've got to know and be current on your history. I said, "Test me again," and he came back on December 5th, I went back in, and that's when he gave me the confirmation. Every year, I celebrate on that day. That's my anniversary.

Deirdre Johnson: I went from there to where I guess the realization of... I was working. I did find a job through a temp agency doing some accounting work. And Kevin, at the time, wasn't working. I came home and told him that I was positive, and he blamed it on me being with other people and that it came from there and not from him. And he says, "What did the doctor say?" I said, "He wants me to take medication," and his response was, "I wouldn't recommend taking medication, because it's toxic to the body."

Deirdre Johnson: And so hindsight, it's like, red flags just went off a billion times. Why would the average person even know that type of information? I knew that he knew someone that was dying from complications of AIDS, but that was just as far as I took it and not on a personal, personal "I'm taking these meds." It didn't dawn on me until years later that he knew. I knew where it came from. There was no question. He just didn't want to ever admit it. He never admitted it, bless his little heart. But he never admitted it, and I don't think he's ever admitted it to anyone in his entire life, although I know that he has been seen... not because of people that are at the spaces, like doctors at the clinics out in northern Virginia... just because of some other folks that have seen, and he's said some things that made me realize.

Deirdre Johnson: We were, at one point actually going to the same space to get treatment.

Speaker 2: Wow.

Deirdre Johnson: I always felt that, which is crazy, in my spirit that every time I walked in that space, that he had either been there or was there. I don't know why, but now I understand why.

Deirdre Johnson: Then from there, let's see. What'd we do? Found out, and then Christmas day his family decided that... They had an annual tradition where they would go to this mountain that's close by within a few miles, and they would climb it. By this time, I'm about four or five months pregnant, and I said I wanted to go. And he was like, "Well, when we get to this part you've got to stop," and I was like, "Eh, okay." That all stemmed from my family background being I'm the oldest child, grandchild. I'm the oldest great-grandchild, and my older son is the oldest great-great-grandchild on my mother's side. And even on my dad's side, even with the spiritualness of his mom and my aunts and cousins and everyone going to church, these guys always talked about this mountaintop experience. I think about even Martin Luther King and the mountaintop experience. And when they said "mountain," that was my first thought, was "Let's go to the top of this mountain."

Deirdre Johnson: Long story short, we made it to the top of the mountain. It was not an easy climb, and I don't know how I did it pregnant, but I did it, and I got there and I fell on my knees and I boo-hoo cried, and I prayed. And to this day I'll never forget the prayer that I literally said to God: "Whatever it is that you want me to do, I will do it. Whoever it is that you want me to go and speak to, I will go. Just, thank you for your grace, your love, and your mercy. I am completely just open," whatever. And then from that moment it was as if there's nothing that Kevin could have said or did that was going to deter me from being a vocal advocate, or just speaking out about how domestic violence, how HIV, how all of these extra things have happened to me, because I don't want... another woman, first, but anyone else to ever have to go through these things and be alone.

Deirdre Johnson: I came down, and I remember saying to him one night... Because I would go to work, I would come home, he would be at home all day, and I would still have to cook and clean. And one of the stipulations was, I had to fix dinner and I would have to serve him his plate before I could ever sit down. Oh, yeah. It was really draconian, yeah. It was crazy. Yeah. Did it. On some levels for survival, on some levels just on... And at that time, it's crazy because once I came down from that mountain I had a plan. And Zion, my youngest, was the plan to get out.

Deirdre Johnson: It was the plan to get out, because I knew that I was at a high risk because I have the HIV, and then I knew that this wasn't a place where he or I needed to be, and so my plan mentally was, "Let's have this baby, and let's say that I need to go home because I'm going to have to have a C-section. So I'm going to try to make it before because my mom is going to be able to help me with this preparation after having a C-section. So that was the plan.

Deirdre Johnson: On February 9th, I went to an infectious disease... I had twofold. One, my OBGYN and my infectious disease followup, because I did start taking medication because I did my own research and was just like, "Screw you. I'm

going to do what's best for... forget me, but for my baby." And we went from there, and I went out, these lovely ladies came and picked me up in this van, and it was my first experience with psychosocial case management, hands-on AIDS organization, community-based organization, coming and picking up a person to take them to their appointment and just showing mad love throughout the whole process. Whether they knew that I was HIV positive or not... I think they did know, but you could just feel the love radiating. It was almost like a switch had just went on that was just like, "You're really going to survive."

Deirdre Johnson: Because I have to admit, when December 5th came and he gave me that diagnosis, my first thought was, "I'm going to die. I'm not even going to try to fake... I'm going to be dying, and I'm going to have to figure out how to tell my family, my unborn child, my older son. How am I going to relay this, and how am I going to live with dignity and grace?" And I really was thinking that that was what was going to happen, but that day when I went to that doctor and when I came in the first appointment was with the infectious disease... and the room was huge... There were people that were in different stages of what I now know of HIV, and happy-go-lucky, bubbly, bald-headed me, because I used to keep a really really close boy cut. I'm walking in just, "Hey, hey." You know, happy-go-lucky.

Deirdre Johnson: I remember walking past this room in the back when they called me to the back, and there was a gentleman that had an IV, and I was saying to myself he was Freddie Mercury, because he had on light pants. And he was hooked up to an IV, and I asked the nurse or whoever was taking me back... I was like, "What's going on?" She was like, "Oh, you didn't know? This is the day that all HIV patients come in and receive treatment from the doctor. This is HIV day." And it was like... You could have knocked me over with a feather, because the room was packed. Granted, there may have been people in support with those folks, but it just was a packed room. And it was a huge room.

Deirdre Johnson: It was like, I just walked past a man that was possibly getting a blood transfusion or something that was medically necessary to keep him alive, and here I am, happy-go-lucky, pregnant and just as happy and plump as possible, and this man is fighting for his life. It was like, "The struggle is real, and what are you going to do about it? Are you going to say in this space and allow this man to abuse you, use you and everything else, and you not reach your full potential?"

Deirdre Johnson: I went home that day, and I had bought a pitbull puppy from him, because my little getaway was on Saturdays and Sundays was to go to the flea market that they had and get... because where we lived was a mile or two, not too far from Juarez, so they would come over and bring there goods and that would just be my picking my little fruits and vegetables for the week, my me time. And this

guy had a puppy, and I bought it and brought it home. When I got home from those two appointments that day, Kevin was in a rage because the puppy was gone. So he was screaming at me like, "Did you steal my puppy? Did you steal my-" I'm like, "Dude, how do I steal a puppy? I'm at a doctors appointment."

Deirdre Johnson: He got mad. I went in the room, and of course even just from the mountaintop experience on Christmas, I had even at that point, my spirituality had just become where reading the Bible was just my sense of peace. I always knew about the Bible, because of family and going to church and being active in my church all the way around, but it just really really started to resonate with me. I went in the room to read the Bible, and we had another dog as well, and the dog kept barking. I went out front to say to Kevin, "Could you please get the dog to stop barking?" And he was gone. I was just like, "What the..." I said, "You know what, God? Thank you for the peace."

Deirdre Johnson: I went back, and I started reading again, and I ended up stopping reading and calling a friend of mine who is now deceased, Crystal, and I said to her... I said, "I'm coming home." And she said, "What?" I said, "I'm coming home." I said, "I'll call you when I get home." She said, "But you already are..." I said, "No. I'll call you when I get home." And I hung up and called my mom and dad, and I told them that I was coming home. And because my dad...

Deirdre Johnson: We had had by this time two back-and-forths where I had went back to Virginia and came back. And one of those coming back to Virginia included bringing my older son with me and having an argument with my parents. That was October 14th; they went in, subpoenaed the judge to get temporary custody of my older son. They ended up coming to Texas and taking him from me. Taking him from me. And we still had a relationship even... because it was before Christmas, right after Thanksgiving. I tried to still keep the relationship so that I could still have a conversation with my son, and that day after I told them I was like, "Look."

Deirdre Johnson: Because my dad actually... Back up... gave me the best advice that I live with the HIV, and it's... When I told him... When I got home that day they told me I was positive, I called Kevin to tell Kevin what was going on. That's when he told me about the toxicity of the medication. I called my mom and dad to tell them, and my dad gave me the best advice that I live with to this day, and it's from [inaudible 00:34:36], and it's "Don't go to sleep thinking about it, and don't wake up thinking about it." It's ever-present, but just don't worry yourself. So that day when I called, he just was like, "Okay, well, call me when you get to the bus station." And I hung up from there and I called Greyhound to find out when the next bus was leaving for Virginia, and I called a cab and they said "We'll be there in 30 minutes." And in 30 minutes, I packed up everything that I owned, and I left. It was probably the best day of my life, because I finally stood up.

Deirdre Johnson: And when I got there, it was February 9th. I got home, it was February 13th. I never went back, never looked back. I started... I think within that week I had called... I don't know if they're still called Northern Virginia AIDS Ministry, but I called them and asked them, "What can I do and how can I get involved?" And they told me about a peer advocacy program and I started doing the peer advocacy, and what they would do is do HIV 101, and they would go into schools, universities, group homes and things. They would do the HIV 101, and then they would have someone share a personal story.

Deirdre Johnson: And so I would be the personal story, and my first place was actually at TC Williams (from Remember the Titans) was my first speaking engagement, and my parents came. It was even the first start of when we started to see stigma. I started to recognize stigma, because as even my parents walked in to say why they were there, there was a lady that they knew that was the secretary there. She's like, "Oh, well what are you guys doing here?" And the whole school knew that there were going to be these folks that were going to be in the space, and they're like, "Well, my daughter is presenting."

Deirdre Johnson: And of course, word gets around to where... and then it's just like, "Crap. Now my activism is now playing a part in my family's day to day living. And how people react to people living with HIV and their stories and their situations could have an impact on them." So that was the first recognition of, I have to be cognizant of what I'm saying and who I'm saying it to, but then at the same time, I've got to do this work. And either you're going to support me or you're not, but it's not even about us living now; it's about generations that are to come that are going to be able to live and know that there's somebody... whether they know her name or not... that stood up and said, "This is me. Accept me for who I am, and we can be a better place if we just all accept everybody's differences."

Deirdre Johnson: So it kind of went from speaking with NOVAM to joining every board possible on how to make change in the realm of case management, of certified prevention case manager.

Speaker 2: So how old are you by this time?

Deirdre Johnson: By this time, I'm 25, 26.

Speaker 3: And you had Zion by this point.

Deirdre Johnson: Yes, May of 2000 I had him... Let's see, was Zion born... May of 2001.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Deirdre Johnson: He was born. HIV negative. And even the fight to have him was one of those things where I did my research, and then when I moved to northern Virginia, back when I got back there in February, I was hooked up with what is now the Inova Juniper Program for Fairfax Hospital. They are specific for people living with HIV, and then had Connie. Connie and [inaudible 00:38:33], my nurse practitioner and case manager. They had about, at the max at the time, it might have been 10 women that were living with HIV that were giving birth, and I was probably case number four or five. They had options, and some of those options were to have a C-section versus having a vaginal birth. My t-cells were in 1200s, and my viral level was undetectable, so I could have had a vaginal, but doing my research I decided, "Let's go for it."

Deirdre Johnson: So the practice I was going to for my OBGYN care, they had of course several people seeing you at different times you go: midwives and everybody. And I had made a determination that at the time I wanted this African-American female to deliver, but she was also pregnant. But when I would go in for my appointments, the part that was really degrading to me is, they would come and just for my breast exams, they would put on gloves. And so it just was like, "Seriously? I know that breast milk is a carrier, but I'm not even at a point where I'm even producing breast milk." So just that whole process just was degrading in itself.

Deirdre Johnson: I feel like my Tammy Fayes are falling off. That's what I call my fake nails. That's what I get for-

Speaker 3: They look good. They look good.

Deirdre Johnson: But... I had to go to a specialist, and he says to me, "Well, Ms. Johnson, I don't understand why you would even want to torture yourself if you want to go through a C-section. Why don't you just go natural childbirth?" And I said, "Well, sir. Let's look at this in the sense of life or death, and if you had the opportunity to survive and these were your options, which would you rather have, the better chance of survival and we want to go with the lowest rate of... If we do it right, everything is going to be perfect, and you definitely have this rate of making it through, versus this asinine one that's not... Which would you choose?" I said, "If it was your child, what would you choose?" And he was like, "Okay," and started writing. Like, yes.

Deirdre Johnson: Even in that moment, I remember thinking, "What if there's a woman that can't advocate clearly, communicate for herself when this... What he would have said might have shut her down and say 'Yeah, you're right,' and had that natural childbirth, as opposed to fighting for what she really wanted?" And that time period was just even more fuel for me to be like, "We've got to get this word out here, although there are so many other factors that are coming in." I just

remember women of African descent coming in and how their partners wouldn't allow them to go get treatment or even have protective barriers, whether it's condoms or birth control, and all these other factors that are coming in, and I'm just worried about having this child and it being okay.

Deirdre Johnson: And now finding out the healthcare professionals don't even halfway know what they're talking about, because one of the parts that they needed to do in the process of my C-section is to have... I believe it's called PCR... PNR, PCR... and that's the test that they would give to children to check for HIV, and it needed to be conducted within 48 hours of the baby being born. And I called two weeks ahead of time to say, "I need to make sure that you guys have this on stock. Is it ready?" And they had no clue what I was talking about. And so it was like, every day I'm calling. "This is what I need, this is what I need." Just until finally they're like, "Yes, ma'am." Like, okay, I got it.

Deirdre Johnson: And I remember the day I was scheduled to go in for my C-section, my water actually broke a little bit beforehand, and I called the OBGYN and they were like, "Hurry up and get there." We get there, and they had already faxed my information to the hospital. The first person I see is someone that went to high school with me, and she's bawling when she sees my face. She's like, "I've seen the paperwork and I saw the name, but I was like, 'It can't be.'" And when I walked in, she just lost it. And of course, then I'm like, "I need you to keep it together, ma'am, because you're the barrier... We'll talk about this later, but I'm trying to process my brain and getting my family ready for this baby situation." And it's my mom, my dad, and my older son are all with me.

Deirdre Johnson: Well, I had a folder... It's funny you have this blue folder sitting here... It was blue. And I actually need to look for it, because I still have it, and it had all the recommendations, because my mom is very meticulous, and I knew if I had a plan and it was written down she would follow it if I was incoherent. And I handed her this thing. She knew it weeks before, here's my birthing plan, if you will. And the lady says, "Well, we're going to go ahead and prep you for the-" Uh-uh.

Deirdre Johnson: And before my mom is fumbling through the paperwork and I'm rambling. "No, you have to put my drip bag for AZT at this for this hour, and this for this hour. Then you need to follow it up with this before you will cut me open." And my mom is just like, "Oh," and finally finds the paper and hands it to the midwife. Hands it to her and was like... She just was like, "Oh." I was like, "Yeah, so you just... I know I'm having a baby, but I'm also not going to let you do anything and everything to me to ensure that this child is not born with HIV. That's my goal."

Deirdre Johnson: I remember after all of these drips, everything's going through; I'm also reading my Bible trying to figure out what name I'm coming up with this child at the

same time, and every other word happened to be "Zion, Zion, Zion." And I remember hearing the anesthesiologist yell down the hall... in the maternity ward that's full with every room... "Don't forget she has HIV!" And so my mom is hearing this; my son, who's about four, whether he understood it or not; my dad... are hearing this thing. And I'm just like, "These people are about to poke me, and I'm scared to death of needles," so I'm just like, "Crap, I can't really cuss him out until after he pokes me, so let's just handle that."

Deirdre Johnson: So then we had the C-section, we have this beautiful child, and I come out and I have... A catheter should be removed within 24 hours; it was in for 36 hours. Yeah. The lady comes in with medicine in her hand to give to me and I'm like, "No, ma'am. I will not take it because I don't know where your hands have been." It should have been in a cup, and it was in her hands instead. And they also put me in the room right next door... They were doing construction so I was in the room right beside the construction, so at 6:00 in the morning then construction... You're hearing jackhammers and all kinds of things that are happening.

Deirdre Johnson: They wheeled my son in after I had him, and they did their procedures and everything, so it took a little longer. And when they bring him in, he has this pink, red index card in his bassinet, and it says "Wear gloves." And from that moment on, my son and I have not, up until he's left to go to Moore House, we have not left each other's side. Because my issue was, why do you have it in this array of beautiful children, the only one that has a special warning is mine.

Deirdre Johnson: And so they fought me tooth and nail. "Ma'am, you can't have your child in here." And I said, "And I'm not going to have him in there where you guys are going to treat him any kind of way. So if you want to touch him, you come in here, and I will watch everything that you're doing." I said, "You've got two options." I said, "You can pack me and this baby up, and you can send me out and have a lawsuit on that end, or you can stay in here and do what I asked you to do. And it's not about me being disrespectful; this is a demand for my son." And that's what he did. He stayed. He stayed, and so I fought. If anything, I didn't want him to be stigmatized because of me. And unless he puts himself at risk, I don't want him stigmatized because of those three stupid little letters.

Deirdre Johnson: So from there, it just kind of... I did case management for a while, ended up on the community planning group for Virginia that's Ryan White-sponsored for the whole state that makes decisions. Decided that I wanted to move to Richmond from Alexandria after 9/11 and came down for an interview for a regional place, without stating all the facts. But they sit me down for an interview for this regional HIV/AIDS coalition, if you will, and I went into the interview. I thought I banged the interview out. Obviously, I must have, because on my way back to Alexandria, I get a call from this doctor and was like, "Hey, listen. This

organization sent me your information, and they suggested that I consider you for our prevention case management position, because we've heard that you're an HIV positive person that can string two sentences together." Yeah.

Deirdre Johnson: So I'm trying to look at a phone and drive straight and be like, "Did this woman just say..." I know I'm a very comfortable person to be around, but did you just say that someone else said "She's an HIV positive person that can string sentences together"? Yeah, you did. So I felt in that moment, let's really show them how we can put sentences together. Let's really, straight up and down, show them how they are more mes in this world than you're even letting on, and even if they're not in a place right now, they can be and they will be.

Deirdre Johnson: So I ended up moving down here, taking the position, becoming a preventive case manager, and then from there transitioned to working for what was then the [inaudible 00:49:11] Free Clinic as... Part-time, I was an outreach worker and did The Sister Project, which got me featured on the front page of the Richmond Times Dispatch, and then my other part-time with them was the first person to start their pharmacy connection program that helped them to get their medication. So I helped to create that process for them and started to run that on my own.

Deirdre Johnson: Them from there, I went to VCU, Virginia Commonwealth University with the Center for Cultural Experiences in Prevention with Dr. Faye Belgrave, and I ran The Sister Project as one of their lead facilitators and went through... I think we did come to University of Richmond, but primarily Virginia State, Virginia Union, VCU, and then surrounding community groups and places around. I ran The Sisters Project, and then got a little burnt out in some of the ways that things were handled and was like, "I'm tired of the political BS, because lives need to be changed and they're not, because we're taking monies from folks like me, who was trying to struggle and to take care of a little kid, and then you have folks that are in higher positions that are not doing as much work, and they're getting paid \$70,000 and I was getting paid \$15 an hour." So where I'm having sleepless nights and these girls are calling me in the middle of the night, then you're sleeping comfortably because, "Oh, they did it," and writing a little check box.

Deirdre Johnson: So I moved over the to medical campus at VCU and started running programs that had nothing to do with HIV whatsoever. A program I actually call the Acceleration Program, where youth, folks that are interested in healthcare sciences and health sciences that are from disadvantaged backgrounds, that we would help support them to get there and achieve their dreams. And ran a program taking care of lovely students. I miss my babies. And ended up going out, leaving from VCU on mental health, because just the demand and some of the crazy people... I just couldn't understand some of the folks that were in

higher positions in a place that had never been in a disadvantaged status in their life, but they're making decisions for these youth that have been homeless and other places, but your dad's a senator. So. How does that work out?

Deirdre Johnson: So it just got to the point where I literally had a nervous breakdown and ended up where my doctor, thank God, was amazing. He was like, "It's enough." He was like, "Deirdre, you're dealing with HIV. You're doing all of these things. You need a break." He says, "And you don't see where that is playing on your mental health," and since 2012, 2013, that's primarily what I've been doing, and then slowly but surely integrating myself back into the advocacy field in small ways, like going to this Positive Women's Network summit and saying, "Hey, I'll volunteer my time." My son is on spring break and I want to show him some service, so he needs to do some... not community service for credit, but I want him to see." And all this while going and speaking to different events about living with HIV, mental health, women's issues, policy issues, just in general and just being relevant.

Deirdre Johnson: Then from there to [inaudible 00:52:56], to creation of Ending Criminalization of HIV and Overincarceration, to now presenting on national levels at different conferences about what we've created with ECHO and down to the powers that be contacting us to say, "Hey, we want your input on how some of these policies can be changed."

Speaker 3: Remind us... Oh, I was going to say, remind us again. ECHO. What is ECHO, again?

Deirdre Johnson: ECHO is Ending Criminalization of HIV and Overincarceration in Virginia.

Speaker 2: So, do you think, given this whole range of issues and things that you've been talking about, what do you think are the biggest challenges or barriers facing people in Virginia, and in Richmond specifically, who are living with HIV?

Deirdre Johnson: Stigma. Stigma, stigma, stigma, stigma. And I think it comes from a lot of different avenues. Education... and it's not that there's a lack of education, but really understanding how that... Me having HIV is just as important in knowing my information about HIV, as it is with those that are not. Because it is not just HIV; we're looking at sexually transmitted infections across the board.

Deirdre Johnson: People are having sex, but they're not wanting to talk about some of the consequences, other than pregnancy. And there are other consequences that come along, good and bad. I mean, I hope they're more good than bad... Well... We'll go with just good and bad [inaudible 00:54:29] explanation on that. But in that sense. And knowing that even if you transmit a virus to someone else, you

can be charged, criminalized for that. And at one point, Richmond was one and two for gonorrhea and chlamydia infections.

Deirdre Johnson: I remember working in the STD clinics and interviewing people. "So, can you tell me some of your sexual partners," and it being like, "It was Ray Ray and Tay Tay from down the street, around the corner." "Well, does Ray Ray and Tay Tay have a name behind it, or just being John or Jim, and do you have a last name?" And not even having that much information but still going out and doing there thing.

Deirdre Johnson: But then when something extra pops up on your test, then you're ready to fight and fuss and carry on. And knowing that everybody has a responsibility in our sexual health. Just because I'm HIV positive and you lay down with me in any way, shape, or form, and you're HIV negative, does not give you the right to point the finger at me because of my status. Because you could have something that could be more detrimental to me, like mumps or measles or something extra, and that too is as important, but stigma. Stigma, stigma.

Deirdre Johnson: There are folks in this area that don't tell their HIV status because they're scared, still, in this day and age, 2019, of losing their jobs, losing their homes, losing their family, losing their friends. And barricading themselves in their homes and not going out, not being public, not... because they're scared that... because someone else, "Oh, well you know, I heard," or "I happened to see him or her coming out of this clinic," or someone mention... Even to take a picture with me, believe it or not, to say... "Well, you know, Deirdre's that person that talks about HIV. Why would he or she be with them?"

Speaker 2: So I know we've got a lot of very backwards laws in Virginia. What are people's legal rights when they have HIV in terms of protecting their jobs, protecting their homes, protecting other things? What are the laws around all that here?

Deirdre Johnson: Well, discrimination, they definitely cannot discriminate on you in regard to your HIV status. They can't. They can't. And if so, contact your nearest legal representative ASAP. But not knowing that information alone still puts fear in folks, and so that information, in my opinion, needs to be widely made available. Of course, anyone of the LGBTQ, and I believe I+... if, for any varying reasons, they cannot discriminate against you for that at all.

Deirdre Johnson: But living as a person with HIV, in "having relations," as my great-grandma would say, I'm a discloser, and if that means that I'm not getting sex any time soon, high five to me because you weren't worth it in the long run if you decide. That's fine. But I know that I protect myself 100%, and as selfish as that might sound, but it's being honest because I have to take care of my family, especially being the sole provider of income in my home. If I get locked up because I

wanted to take 15 minutes of fun, where's my son? He's [inaudible 00:58:00]
We don't know how things are going to... I mean, I have parents, but still. It's my primary responsibility.

Speaker 3: So-

Speaker 2: Can you-

Speaker 3: Sorry, go ahead.

Speaker 2: No, I was going to ask, can you talk a little bit about parenting children-

Speaker 3: That was my question, too.

Speaker 2: And how that relationship has transformed... and that you're such an advocate, so how have your children received that? As a parent myself, we're wondering, how do you transfer that information? How do you make sure they're also on the right path?

Speaker 3: And how has your relationship with them... because it sounds like especially with your older son, right?

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.

Speaker 3: There was some ups and downs in the early years.

Deirdre Johnson: You're going to laugh at me, because I'm about to [inaudible 00:58:43].

Speaker 3: No, no. Don't worry.

Deirdre Johnson: The crazy part, especially with my older son, is... I don't know how he feels. I really don't know how he feels. He's a very private person, and I really, really, really have always desired to sit down and have this conversation on, how has this impacted you? How has it impacted your relationship with me, in a sense where the biggest impact for me is not being there, and on a lot of levels, not really given the full opportunity to be there like I wanted to be. And even that being with some stigma within the family and some assumptions and some communications that we couldn't get past.

Speaker 2: Did he come back to live with you when you came home when you were pregnant with Zion?

Deirdre Johnson: I lived in the home with my parents.

- Speaker 2: Okay.
- Deirdre Johnson: For about... barely a year, and then I moved to Richmond.
- Speaker 2: With him.
- Deirdre Johnson: With just Zion.
- Speaker 2: Just with Zion, okay.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah, he stayed back with my parents. At that point, my parents had had... It was as if it was their child and not my child, and there were even instances where they... In order to get to Amelia, they have to pass... I was living off of Forest Hill, and they had to pass my house in order to get there, and there were times that I would find out on Sunday as they're on their way back home that he's even there. And I may or may not have had transportation to get there, but just even, "Hey, can we just stop by for 15 minutes, or five minutes?" You know, let me hug him.
- Deirdre Johnson: I don't know if it was he was uncomfortable; I don't know, and I've always tried to ask those dynamics and tried to really force myself to be there. The most that I've had the opportunity to really participate is in basketball his junior and senior high school years, and I would... not necessarily get a schedule like, "Here's the schedule." It'd be like, two days before, "He's playing at such and such, and if you can make it." And then trying to fit it in in my advocacy to make sure that I'm taking those hours away to do that and be present, but sometimes arriving late or maybe not even at all because of traffic, and going to Alexandria from here. Just all kinds of things, and not always having reliable transportation, either.
- Deirdre Johnson: So it became a barrier, and in my eyes, he sees more my parents as his parents than he does me. He knows I'm Mom, but the relationship he has with them is totally different. And that's probably been the source of a lot of my depression, because I have two kids and I didn't raise two kids. On some crazy level in my mind, whether it's true or not, I believe it's because of my HIV status and the dealings with that.
- Deirdre Johnson: It's kind of interesting, because how Zion comes in is, Zion was literally my sole caregiver when I couldn't get out of bed and was sick. So at a very early age, he's been able to recognize little nuances about my voice inflections, my body language, and all of these things, and knows. I mean, he'll just walk up with a ginger ale. "Okay, my mom doesn't feel good right now." And just being intuitive to those things and knowing, even in my speaking, he's always been there. Zion has always really been there at my speaking engagements, and I've had times

where I'd be speaking and he would hear my voice crack as if I was about to cry; I'm keeping it together, keeping it professional, and he feels it, and he'll just walk up out of the audience and just stand right beside me. Because he knew I needed that support.

Deirdre Johnson: And even in him getting ready to transition into college, because... He's such an amazing kid. He's a singer, so he loves to sing. He went to Appomattox Regional Governor's School for Performing Arts, and it's been tough because in advocacy...

Deirdre Johnson: Even though I've learned in becoming HIV positive... I've learned more about people that are in the LGBTQI+ community once I became HIV positive, and I even can have to be honest and transparent with myself to say that I even had some stigmas and discriminatory issues with their whole community, because I was ignorant and unaware. And in this process of becoming HIV positive, it has opened my eyes to a whole community and realization that even in my advocacy, HIV would not even be in a position if it wasn't for trans women, because Marsha P. Johnson threw that brick, and I can't not acknowledge that if it wasn't for any of them, I wouldn't even be able to stand forward and present myself without fear of life or limb. Of losing either/or. And the fight of all gay men... or yes, it may have started with one group, but now the fight of gay men that are moving a lot of our movements forward [inaudible 01:04:23] awareness on it, and I had to acknowledge that. Even in that, that the parenting, I had to acknowledge that there were some things that I recognized with Zion that I started to see at, this is about to happen in your home.

Deirdre Johnson: When he was about 13, he came out, and he shared with me that he was gay. And it was probably the hardest pill... One of my friends would say it was like swallowing peanut butter, and it was like... Whoa, where did this come from? And it was... All right. At first, I was pissed. I have to be honest. I was pissed. But I was pissed because I recognized that I was going with the social norm of what society says that a man and a woman should be and how their relationship should be and how they move forward in life. And I had to step back and recognize that even in advocacy, I don't want us to be pigeonholed. So why would I support and be mad because I have an amazing son, amazing child, that wants to love whomever he wants to love, and I can't force him to love or be excited about something or someone that he's not going to be excited about in his soul, in his spirit.

Deirdre Johnson: It changed our dynamic, because he's helped me to be more understanding, and I just finally sat him down one day and was like, "Look. No matter what, you're my kid. So I don't care who you love, and I'm sorry for being an asshole." I really had to suck it up and put on my big girl panties and say I'm sorry for being a jerk and coming across the way that it came. "But that was my not understanding

and me thinking on what other people's perception of what things should be, as opposed to the way that it is going to be. And you are valuable. You are so important."

Deirdre Johnson: And I thought about all the young men and all the young women whose parents have put them out, and how they're not dealing with an HIV epidemic because their families, their surroundings, ignore them or pushed them out and now they're living on the streets. They're doing survival sex; they're engaging in risk behaviors that are putting them more at risk for HIV. And I didn't want him to not have that safety net or have the safe home environment, of going out and asking for something by means that you don't even have to do it if you just come and ask me for \$20. Yeah, I'm [inaudible 01:07:05] because you're asking me for \$20 because I'm a parent and that's what I'm supposed to do, but I would rather you come and ask me for the \$20, versus do something that will put you at more risk for sexually transmitted infections, or more specifically HIV.

Deirdre Johnson: And especially as a young black gay male and how the rates of HIV are in our communities, period. I don't want this to be your narrative.

Speaker 2: That leads us to another question, which is, why do you think Richmond has such high rates of STDs in general, and HIV specifically?

Deirdre Johnson: I think a lot of factors come into play. We have 95 that's running in and out. We are at a commercial epicenter, if you will, if you look at the Port Authority and what's there. That means we have truck drivers that are coming in and out. We have students at different colleges from all walks of life that are coming and having their friends to visit and vice versa. We have different businesses that are making their way here and are setting foot and making root here in Richmond, and with that comes all kinds of personalities and intersections of things that are happening. And we've got to be honest; one of those common things is sex.

Deirdre Johnson: Wherever you find your niche of wherever you want to get pleased in that area, it's there. And you can also tie in where drugs come in to play as well, because again, part of pleasure, some of those extra things as well. And with some things being so stigmatized, people are going underground and doing things because they don't want their neighbors to know. You know, in my little nice community, everybody knows everybody. Literally, I came home Tuesday, and by Tuesday evening I had at least two neighbors at my house. "Oh, you're back home." I hadn't called them to tell them I was home, but they're watching and they're vigilant. So even in that space, I have to be secretive. If I use that example, if there's any extra thing that I want to do, I've got to bring them in in the middle of the night, or I have to leave out in a secret car or not tell them everything. You know, all of these things in order to not put my business on the front street.

Deirdre Johnson: And I think communication. Because we're so scared. It also ties into the stigma; we're so scared to tell our truths.

Speaker 2: Well, if there was a truth that you would tell to all the people out there who are ignorant about HIV... because that's one of the things that we really want to do with our exhibition, right? What would you say to people?

Deirdre Johnson: [inaudible 01:10:07]. We're people too. We're people too, and HIV is not who we are. It's a part of who we are. Think of the amazing women that have been a part of this project, and they all have different life stories that have intertwined in what our common theme is that connects us is the HIV. And if you take away that HIV, you still have beautiful women, beautiful, productive members of society doing in their own spaces, doing these things, but then as soon as you hear, "Oh, such and such is great." "Oh, by the way." You've got to add that old, "It's the HIV." HIV helps us to put into perspective all of the great things that we are doing, and it just so happens to be the bonus, it gets to tie it back to HIV and make it great.

Deirdre Johnson: It's not as bad as it seems, either. And although 19 years ago I thought I was going to be dead... and again, I had to learn, and I had to educate myself on what's the best practice to keep me from dying, and knowing more about my medication, keeping a great relationship with my doctor and having the communication, letting him know everything that I'm doing, whether I want him to know or not. "Yeah, I had 20 drinks last night, sir." But him to know that, or her to know that, so that they can help me get to healthy status so now I can see not just one kid graduate from college; now one's going to graduate from college and one going to college, and prayerfully see some grandkids or nieces or somebody. I don't know. But no time soon, because I don't have time for them right now. Sorry, grandkids. I'll let those be to your daddies. Okay? I'll let them handle that part.

Deirdre Johnson: HIV is livable. It's not a death sentence. It's not who we are. It's just... HIV is not who we are. It is what's helping us to move forward in making more change for those people that are living with HIV, but our end goal: we don't want anybody. We don't want you.

Speaker 3: So what's the legacy that you're creating?

Deirdre Johnson: Hope. Hope. Hope and... little things turn into big things. Because sitting in my bed watching TV and sending emails on my cell phone about, "No, I don't think that this is a good idea, and how can I get involved?" Literally just asking a simple question, "How can I get involved, and what can I do," and not even if you make executive decisions on these boards or the things that we all sit on, but just even being aware and being able to share with five other people, and

whether just one of the five it sinks in and they say, "Hold on. This might affect some people that I know," and then being the go-to, just in literally laying in my bed. It's crazy. That's crazy. Hope. Hope that the smallest thing that you do can make a big, big impact.

Deirdre Johnson: You guys just put that in... seriously made me think into perspective. I teared up on that because it just... I never would have thought in a million years someone like me, that when you think of HIV, period, would even look like me, would even be like me... and just the smallest little things, laughing and joking, just saying, "Hey, I'm taking my meds today." It's made a major impact. When you get a call or message from someone who says "I'm 28 years old. I've been born with HIV. I stopped taking my medication. I have pneumonia. I have one t-cell, and I have a viral load of 1.2 million. And because I watched your show and you said, 'Take your meds' and you did a little crazy dance and you made me laugh, I started taking my medicine again." That's the dumbest damn thing I could have thought of in my whole entire life. As honest as it is, it's the dumbest damn thing, but it's the most impactful thing. And I didn't do it for impact; that's the part that blows my mind.

Deirdre Johnson: I didn't do it for impact. I didn't get into it for the likes. I didn't do it to be famous. I'm not doing it for anything other than to encourage myself, because some days it's hard to even want to pick that pill up and put it in my mouth. But I know that there are other people that are struggling too, and...

Speaker 2: What is that struggle about? The struggle to take that pill? What is the barrier for people?

Deirdre Johnson: Remembrance of probably the day that you get the diagnosis, and your first thought, and the stigmas that are associated, whether they are implied or not. Your family. Your friends. Your life. Your daily living. Knowing that there is a possibility that you could get sick and not recover, all because you took a few minutes out of your day to do something. And whether it was sex, whether it was to use drugs, whether it was something that someone did to you... even whether in the case of abuse or rape... that something, a few moments in your life, made an impact on...

Deirdre Johnson: And I have this saying that I created... It's funny, I think I actually created it, funny part, at University of Richmond, believe it or not. There's a... I don't know if she's still there, and I can't think of her name right now, but there was... She worked in, I believe, the biology department. And she would always have people come in, and she would have me come in and speak about living with HIV. Nice little Jewish lady. Oh, goodness...

Speaker 3: April Hill?

- Deirdre Johnson: No... Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa...
- Speaker 2: I don't know too many.
- Speaker 3: I don't, either.
- Speaker 2: Linda Boland?
- Deirdre Johnson: No, no, no. I'm trying to... I don't know if she's still there. This was back in... Oh, goodness.
- Speaker 2: Who else was there...
- Deirdre Johnson: 2002, three... about 2005, 2006, after. About that time period.
- Speaker 2: Because I don't even think there are any nice little Jewish ladies there anymore.
- Deirdre Johnson: Oh. Oh.
- Speaker 3: It's mostly men, unfortunately. But we're going to look it up.
- Deirdre Johnson: She would have me come in and speak to her class, and I came up with this phrase... The nerd in me definitely will never, ever die. Nerds are cool, folks. Nerds are awesomely cool. Minutes, plus or minutes moments, equals a lifetime. It takes a minute to complete a task, no matter what it is; it takes a moment to make a difference, and what I would tell the kids: It takes a minute or two, or 15, 20, 60, 70 if you're lucky, to engage in sexual activity. It takes a moment to make a difference by putting on a condom or choosing not to, or whatever preventative methods to equal a lifetime of experiences, or to share that innocence. So always make sure your minutes and your moments count to equal the best life you can have.
- Deirdre Johnson: I was actually, I remember writing down on the boards. "Hey, I just came up with something," and they were like, "What does it mean?" And I was like, "Profoundly, here it goes." You know, it was really off the cuff, off the top of my head. Yay, me.
- Speaker 2: Nice, yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: But I'd normally have that written, or I'd write it out on spaces, but... yeah, we're people. HIV, that legacy is... I don't want HIV to be my legacy... but I want it to be my legacy. I want my kids and their kids and their kids and their kids to be able to walk out in the space and be their authentic self, as in... I don't ever

want another child and their parent to be sitting in a room. I took my son for... He wanted to have...

Deirdre Johnson: May 9th, it was his 18th birthday. May 10th, he sends me the outfit of his dreams, which was this beautiful with tulle skirt, with a beautiful black lace shirt and some black pumps. And I think... I don't know if it was a tiara, a fan... I mean, he had the works. And my old self was literally like, "What the..." but then my new self was like, "Hell, yeah! We're going to do this, and we're going to do it big." And I took him, and we went looking for his first pair of pumps. And this lady was funny... The girl that lives... Well, Yolanda. We were in Payless, and we ended up buying [inaudible 01:19:53]. So I'm trying to negotiate between the prices on the stands and making sure my son has the best looking freaking pumps for his prom. I was like, "Ma'am, hold on." I was like, "I need to check and make sure my son's pumps." And she looked at me like, "Your son's pumps?" I said, "Yes, ma'am. I am that mom that is going to buy my son his first pair of pumps. Take it or leave it."

Speaker 2: Nice.

Deirdre Johnson: And there's women who are walking past, and they're looking, and he's trying on, and here I am: "Try these on, baby. These look cute." So we have an array of shoes out, and these women are walking past with their little girls, and you can hear and feel the vibe and you're just like, "Bitch, what?" So, "Let's try these on." And I purposely had him put them on and take a walk. "Go take a walk, and show them how you really walk in these." And he took a walk, and he would come back, and I'd be like... I felt like Celie in *The Color Purple* when she sticks her tongue out. And just was really proud in that moment, and that even turned into a bonding experience because then from there...

Deirdre Johnson: He didn't even know secretly I was going to make that his debut of coming out for our family, even. And that I was going to be supportive of him no matter what. And that day, actually Yolanda, she wasn't staying here at the time; she was this chauffer. And he came, and I helped him like you would anyone else getting dressed, help make sure everything was ironed and pressed and beautiful and all the accessories. And I made him stay in the house before, and I closed the door, and what I did was took a red tablecloth runner and ran it down the sidewalk. And I wouldn't let him come out... I said, "Don't come out until I tell you," and I gave Yolanda the cue, and he came out and I had a little sign for him and it said "2019," and he had to walk the red carpet. And I Facebook'd it live to be like, "No matter what, support your kids. No matter what, support your kids and their dreams."

Speaker 3: That's beautiful.

Speaker 2: It is. It is.

Deirdre Johnson: So, yeah. He's been my everything, and I thank God for both of my boys, but my legacy is for the way that he felt that moment he walked down that red carpet, to be able to feel that in the world all the time. From everyone. And everyone actually feel that feeling. Every time, no matter what your differences are. That you walk out every day and you feel like a freaking movie star, and not feel like, "Oh gosh, I have brown hair" or "I have blue eyes" or "I have dark skin" or "I have curly hair." You know, just... I do. And so what? I'm awesome.

Speaker 3: So your parents seem to have been there from beginning to end. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with them and how... the Deirdre that was then and the Deirdre that is now seem like two very different people, right? And so what are their thoughts about that? What do they say about you now? Thank you for being so brave and so courageous taking all the steps that you've done...

Deirdre Johnson: My mom and I actually talked about it a couple days ago, before I got here. And she said to me it's hard for her to watch the videos on Facebook and to read my posts, because she says "No matter what, you're my daughter, you're my child. And it hurts to see you going through these things and I don't even know how to help you. And the only thing I can offer is a hug or a listening ear." She says, "I don't know a lot of the things that you know." I'm trying to explain to her what this call was about and this change in some policies, and she's just like, "I don't even know what you're talking about, but I know it's big." And I think I amaze them because they knew the Deirdre before, and then they see me now.

Deirdre Johnson: When he we our strategic planning for ECHO in Alexandria last November and I invited them, I was like, "Oh, I'm planning this meeting," and they were probably like, "Yeah, okay. Whatever. It's probably... Who knows, with Deirdre, what it is? It's probably going to be coloring and painting. Who knows." And they walked in and saw 18 people from across the state, some living with HIV. We had lawyers; we had doctors; we had politicians; we had folks legitimately from national organizations that supported and paid for the whole thing. And they were like, "You're kidding me. Is this really happening? I thought it was just some little small 'Let's talk some junk' type meeting. This is serious business."

Deirdre Johnson: And my dad actually gave us some great advice in the sense of, especially with the overincarceration piece, but to speak to those that be... like for us it would be big pharma in a roundabout way, but the folks that control the incarceration, jails and things, because that's where they make their money, so we have to get their buy-in as well to help us with some of these laws and things that we would like to have changed or modernized. And I think that was probably a moment for him when the light bulb went off like, "This is some big stuff, and this could potentially be some major..." and then as things have come along, going to

different conferences across the country and presenting on what we've done with ECHO in... what, six months at that time; now next month it'll be a year, and where we've been able to get to in this process.

Deirdre Johnson: So when I called and told her, she says, "Dee, the other day you were doing a show." She came on, and I started crying. And she was like, "When you started crying, I started crying." So she was like, "So I don't ever want to be on there to mess you up," and I said, "Well, actually it encourages me even more because it makes me feel like you're interested in what I'm doing and how it's affecting me on a level that you may not be able to see, because I might not share it with you." And she was like, "It just still hurts."

Deirdre Johnson: So I know they support me; I know they are proud of me. They do say that. But at the same time, it hurts. And to know that this person knew that he was HIV positive, he didn't tell me, and now my daughter is living with HIV. And things could have been way different if she knew. Would I still have had sex with him? Probably not without protection, but I still think I would have been that under... My dad says, "You always root for the underdog." I still would have been like, "Okay, but let's use protection."

Speaker 3: So what ever happened to Kevin?

Deirdre Johnson: He died.

Speaker 2: [crosstalk 01:27:20]

Speaker 3: He died. He passed away.

Deirdre Johnson: He died. I tried to go for child support, and the way that I found out was the lovely Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement sends me this letter to say, the noncustodial parent is deceased, and he had died. He died back in 2006, I believe.

Speaker 2: So when Zion was still very little.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. He died... That's when I found out. I got a letter, and I think I got the letter Thursday, and that Friday or Saturday some friends were going to the beach and I took him with me to beach. And I can't remember if I told him that he... I think I told him that his dad had passed, and we sat and he was just kind of like, "Okay." But he's never met him, and I will say that Kevin has seen Zion, because he saw Zion when was... maybe at the most, three months old, but at the least, three weeks old. But I don't think it was three weeks, because it would have taken me a second to...

Deirdre Johnson: Actually, sorry about this... Excuse me. Hold on. Hey, Kelly? I'm doing fine. Can I give you a call back in about 45 minutes? I'm actually doing that interview. Okay, thank you. All right, bye bye.

Deirdre Johnson: Sorry, ladies.

Speaker 2: No problem.

Speaker 3: No worries.

Deirdre Johnson: [inaudible 01:28:53]

Speaker 2: You want to get lunch [inaudible 01:29:13]

Speaker 3: [inaudible 01:29:15]

Speaker 2: It's 12:30.

Speaker 3: [inaudible 01:29:18]

Speaker 2: I think we have a lot to work with.

Speaker 3: Oh my gosh. I'm reminded that we have to go back to the interviews and look at organizations that were mentioned. Remember...?

Speaker 2: I think when we do that we should give Deirdre a list, and maybe she can talk about some of them.

Speaker 3: I agree. I agree.

Speaker 2: Because it's a tangled web.

Speaker 3: Yeah, and of course there's so many more now that... you know. That were not in the conversation when we were talking to Dale or...

Speaker 2: [inaudible 01:29:57]

Speaker 3: Yeah. That's why it's out.

Deirdre Johnson: [inaudible 01:30:00] Positive Women's Network.

Deirdre Johnson: The other part that's moved forward with the policy stuff is, I was selected as a police fellowship member, so every week we meet for almost... well, December will be the ninth month, but we've met since April, and we get trained or learn

about different advocacy work, from racial justice, gender justice, reproductive health, even how our laws are made on the national level, on the federal level, and on the state level. And just how to tie in six principles, values that PWN focuses on and how we tie those in.

Deirdre Johnson: So at my practicum is to actually create something similar to a palm card that would talk about the laws in Virginia.

Speaker 3: That gets us to what is maybe our final question, which is, you have mentioned so many organizations, and other people have mentioned organizations, and what we would love to do once we get this all transcribed is to come up with a list of organizations and sit down with you or talk to you on the phone and have you explain what each one is and how they fit in so that can become part of the exhibition too, because we feel like every time we go on an interview we learn about another organization.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And it's interesting, because what we're learning is that there are so many intersectionalities between different things. One of the other key people, especially that ECHO works with, is the Center for HIV Law and Policy.

Speaker 2: Is that national or statewide?

Deirdre Johnson: It's national.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Deirdre Johnson: They're national, and they're based out of New York.

Speaker 2: And this group that you're a policy fellow for, which one of the 15 groups that you mentioned is that for?

Deirdre Johnson: That's actually, this one's the Positive Women's Network, and they are primarily an advocacy group, and they encourage folks, especially women, living with HIV to become advocates. And they give you every tool imaginable from how to even start doing speaking, who to talk to, how to talk to folks from legislators to your doctors, even. Relationships, we talk about everything.

Speaker 2: You know what I'm thinking, Deirdre, is when the show opens, it would be amazing to have a table somewhere that has cards-

Deirdre Johnson: Absolutely.

Speaker 2: Pamphlets, other things-

- Deirdre Johnson: Absolutely.
- Speaker 2: ... that people can pick up. I think that would be fantastic.
- Deirdre Johnson: I think that would be great. Human Rights Campaign, even. All of these folks, we're all working together, and depending on where you are in your advocacy, you're hitting on somebody.
- Speaker 2: Would you be interested in being our point person for that?
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.
- Speaker 2: Since you've mentioned so many organizations. You know about that one.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yes, yes. Yes, yes, yes.
- Speaker 2: That would be fantastic, because what we're trying to do with the exhibition is really bring in a very wide array of audiences. Some will be people who are very familiar with HIV from the medical standpoint, from living with HIV, but there will also be a lot of people who have a vague clue but not much more than that, so we want to be able to speak to that whole range.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. And even what a lot of folks... and this is why I love [inaudible 01:33:56]... is because what we're seeing is how to age gracefully living with HIV.
- Speaker 2: Absolutely. She is the living embodiment of that.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yes. And to see her... I actually just recommended her for a summit, to be one of the speakers, because at the end of the day, she is doing something that a lot of folks have tried to do, and there's a lot of folks... I mean, she's getting women to come out that wouldn't normally be out and seen, and to some of us they might be a repeat, but I know that she has a way to pull folks out. And the bigger that folks see... Not even bigger, but the more comfortable that people feel, and they already... We already know. It's like home.
- Deirdre Johnson: You see us like family; we know everything about each other's kids and some more things, that they will feel more comfortable to come out and participate, and also have the understanding that what I'm doing on advocacy with 50 million people... You might not be ready for that. And I get it. But if you are, I'm not going to leave you hanging and throw you to the wolves and be like, "Oh, call this person." No, come on. Let me walk you over; let me introduce you so that you can meet such and such and such and such, and now that person, if I'm coming as a gatekeeper to say to you, "Hey, watch out for this person," and they

will mentor. And they're like, "Okay, hey. I remember you. Deirdre brought you over, and you're doing blah blah blah blah blah." And then it just...

Deirdre Johnson: Because at some point, I'm going to get tired, and I'm going to have those grandkids, and I'm going to have to sit down with those grandkids, so I want other folks to be able... so youth, too. There aren't too many people. I'm probably the younger of the bunch at 44, but bringing in more youth, because they're going to be the future in the sense of how we're going to end this epidemic. Comprehensive sexual education in Virginia, it's not what it needs to be.

Speaker 2: Oh, goodness, no.

Deirdre Johnson: At all.

Speaker 3: No. My daughter went to TJ, and they would have abstinence rallies. That's their sex ed.

Deirdre Johnson: Bless their heart.

Speaker 2: I won't even say what my son said, literally two weeks ago, about getting HIV. I was just like, "Oh, gosh. What the..."

Speaker 3: I both have very... I will say it... ignorant 16-year-old sons.

Speaker 2: Trying to be too cool, and I'm just like, "Oh, hell no. We're going to have to sit down."

Deirdre Johnson: Girl, tell him to call me. It'd be the funniest story ever. Once you understand my sense of humor, I will take the most asinine thing and turn it into a learning lesson. And I remember having to come down here to Petersburg to a group of boys, a boys'... something, transitional space... and the guy that invited me, we worked together as outreach workers. And he's like, "Dee, I would love for you to come and talk to these boys."

Deirdre Johnson: So I come in, and I'm doing my thing, and normally when I do my presentations I don't out the box let them know that I'm HIV positive, and I play this game with them, the candy game. And we have these candies that, some are wrapped and some are unwrapped, and we play hot potato with it, and all this time I'm doing my introduction. "Oh, hi. I'm Deirdre. I'm here to talk to you about blah blah blah." Keep passing, whatever. And they're passing, and they pass it, and then I'll have them stop. "Stand up if you have candies. Would you eat it?"

Deirdre Johnson: And then, of course, the ones with the wrapped were, "Yeah, I would eat it, but it's not my flavor" or something like that, and the ones with the unwrapped would say, "Nah, I'm not going to eat it. I don't know where your hands have been." I was like, "Well, these pieces of candies represent your bodies. You don't necessarily know where things have been, and it's really important to put a barrier between you and your body."

Deirdre Johnson: One of the gentlemen... Again, I didn't tell them anything about a status. We're chit chatting, we're going through all the STDS. We get to HIV, and he says, "I would never be in a room with a person that's HIV positive." I just smiled and was like, "Yes, I got him. I got him." Of course, beforehand, I mean, you could tell... These little 16, 17-year-old boys. I'm in my early 30s, and they're thinking I'm about their age still and they're like, "Yeah, so, a little bit later, ma'am, you can..." Ugh. Boy, you're old enough to be my baby. [inaudible 01:38:28]

Deirdre Johnson: So he says that, and I go behind him, and he was one of the ones that was kind of hitting on me, and I put my arm on him, and I said, "Surprise." He was like, "What are you talking about, Ms. Deirdre?" I was like, "You've been in the room for the past 45 minutes with a person with HIV." And he was like, "Where? Where? Where?" And I was like, "She's got her hands on you right now." And he was like, "Oh my God!" I mean, went... and then, long story short, after the presentation he came to me and apologized. And he said to me, he says, "You know what, Ms. Deirdre? That was the most impactful conversation I've ever had."

Deirdre Johnson: And at that time, and for years afterward, he would contact the person who had me and ask, "How's she doing? Is she okay? Does she need anything?" And it was just in that small little instance, what do you think people living with HIV look like, or act like, or talk like? The last thing you see when you see me is HIV. You don't see that. So, yeah. Trust me. [crosstalk 01:39:33]

Speaker 2: He said only gay people get HIV.

Speaker 3: Yes, that's what my son said, too.

Speaker 2: I was like, "NO!"

Speaker 3: The thing that's so crazy is, they have us as mothers. We're talking about it all the time with them, and it's like their skulls are thick. They're thick. Nothing really penetrates. Or maybe it does and they just don't let on, because does your son also say, "Oh, social justice warrior, huh?"

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- Speaker 3: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: And you know, too, messaging. Because when you look at the pills, or even in magazines that we have now, when they're showing pills for HIV or even with the PrEP, you notice who it always is; it's normally a gay male.
- Speaker 2: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: And it's never a person that looks like us.
- Speaker 2: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Deirdre Johnson: And so automatically, the messaging would defer, "Oh, well it's just those gay men get it." And that's one, even in this advocacy crap that we've been going through is, we need to change these messages.
- Speaker 2: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: Because there's not people that look like me; now you have women that look like me that are not even interested in PrEP because it's not even marketed to them, because they're, "That person doesn't look like me on TV."
- Speaker 2: You know, it's interesting. We met with Gonzalo Bearman, who's the head of the ID... You know him, right? And we were talking to him about PrEP, and he said it is the most frustrating thing, because people from the community around here who are at high risk are not on PrEP, and my patients who are on PrEP are white guys with office jobs from the suburbs.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yup. And then you'd think, and what folks have said is, well, one thing that folks may or may not know... We sort of know... that the PrEP pill is an HIV medication, so that when you bring in now, you go in for your consult and they share with you, "Well, this is also used to treat HIV," and then you bring that pill back home to an already stigmatized community, the first thing they're thinking is not PrEP for preparation, but PrEP for, "Oh, no, you've got it."
- Deirdre Johnson: And now family members are pulling away. Kids, you can't come over to your house, or they're talking about you. And you're actually just going to try to do your sexual health, and even if you try to explain it, because they may not have the information or knowledge, then they, "Whatever. You're just trying to say that. You got HIV." And if you walk into somebody's house... I don't necessarily do this... When you're walking through and you're checking out pills. "Oh." And you don't want to necessarily let them know, "I checked out your pills today and I seen, and I googled it, and you've got HIV." So it's...

- Speaker 2: It's complex.
- Deirdre Johnson: It is. It really is. And we look into the housing situation, because we don't have adequate housing...
- Speaker 2: That's going to be secondary, yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. And if I have a pill... Like, now I'm on Dovato, and Dovato is just, instead of a three combo, it only has two medications in it. Now a concern is is that if resistance happens, how do they treat, because now it's two medications versus three medications. [inaudible 01:42:57] with resistance on my part is if I skip doses and some more stuff, but if I am given that because my home situation varies and I don't have to take a meal with that, which is good because I can take it any time; it doesn't put you to sleep, and you can take the meds at any time. I mean, without a meal. Then, again, I'm back to square one, because somebody sees it on my backpack. Then we're back to, "Oh, don't you go over there and talk to them." High school stuff.
- Deirdre Johnson: So it is very, very complex.
- Speaker 2: But this has got to be so helpful, Dee, for people to understand, because I think a lot of people think, "What's wrong with those people? There's a simple pill to take. All they've got to do is take a pill every day, and we could be done with AIDS tomorrow."
- Deirdre Johnson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Speaker 2: And I think when we're talking to people, just in our daily lives... and I'm not even talking about our super ignorant sons, but...
- Speaker 3: Cool, cool, cool.
- Speaker 2: [crosstalk 01:44:07]
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. That message comes up.
- Speaker 2: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: And it's another reason why, especially with my medication show, that I encourage all people to take their medication, because it even trickles into folks having to take blood pressure medication, diabetes medication. If you are diabetic and you need to have your insulin, it needs to be cooled, and you're walking the street all day. It's not going to be effective at all. So it opens up the doors for a whole lot of other stuff. Yeah.

Deirdre Johnson: We could talk all day, honeys.

Speaker 2: We can.

Speaker 3: I know.

Deirdre Johnson: But I mean, thank you all for this...

Speaker 2: Thank you.

Speaker 3: Thank you so much.

Speaker 2: Thank you for just your time, your care, your love-

Speaker 3: Your wisdom.

Speaker 2: ... and wisdom, yeah. It's really... It's moving, right?

Deirdre Johnson: Thank you.

Speaker 2: It's really moving. We admire what you're doing.

Speaker 3: Absolutely.

Speaker 2: And we want to share it with the world.

Speaker 3: That's the main thing, right, is sharing it with the world and with people who may not be getting that message, right?

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.

Speaker 3: Because they're just people who like to go to the Valentine. They don't really know or give a second thought to HIV, and sometimes just getting them into that space.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. And I wish that... Even... I don't know if it's... With even the Black History Museum, not just because of the women of color that are represented, but just because of the space and it being around the community that would be affected in as well.

Speaker 2: [crosstalk 01:46:02]

Speaker 3: The Black History... We should reach out again. The Black History Museum can be a tough nut to crack. That's who we reached out to initially, before the

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Valentine. And they don't have a full time curator, right, so... At first they said, "Great, that sounds wonderful. Let's talk," and then it was crickets.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.

Speaker 2: Adele Johnson is now the director, though.

Speaker 3: This is, I'm talking about Adele Johnson. She was the interim who I reached out to.

Speaker 2: Right.

Speaker 3: I mean, I think she is-

Speaker 2: Now she is. Now she's the director. Maybe we should reach out again. Let them know, at least, that-

Speaker 3: That this is going on.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. And even within that, even as you can see even the economic issues, see even within that.

Speaker 2: That's true.

Deirdre Johnson: You know what I mean?

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Deirdre Johnson: And it's unfortunate that it's even that way, but even how that even correlates with this epidemic.

Speaker 3: It's so true.

Speaker 2: Absolutely.

Speaker 3: It's so true. It's an underfunded museum.

Speaker 2: Right.

Speaker 3: It's way underfunded. And when we sit in a meeting with the Valentine, at the Valentine, they're saying, "Oh, yes. Altria always gives us money. Diversity gives us money." They have all of these funding streams coming in.

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.
- Speaker 3: And it's very different. It's a different wealth base.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Wow. Wow. I mean, I'm thinking of Miss Wilnette and how, even how she struggled to get things accomplished because the wealth stream comes in places that we have to poke and prod and get it.
- Speaker 2: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: And not understanding how it has relevance to those folks that are... It's not because we just want your money.
- Speaker 2: Right.
- Speaker 3: But it just takes money to get things done. It's pretty basic.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That would... I don't even... Yeah. I just applaud you all. I really do. This is... Those folks that are still sitting in the closet and are scared to come out and scared to share that they have HIV, I want those folks to know it's okay. You don't have to disclose, but just know that you're great.
- Speaker 2: I think having the St. Paul's group at the core of the exhibition is going to be so impactful.
- Speaker 3: Yeah.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yes.
- Speaker 3: Yeah.
- Speaker 2: It's going to make a huge difference, and it's going to look like a very different exhibition than what... At the beginning, we were struggling to get outside of the gay white male community.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.
- Speaker 2: Because you need to be connected. You know how it is. You need that first connection.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.
- Speaker 2: And then as soon as we met Lindsay, everything opened up.

- Speaker 3: Things opened up.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. And I'm glad that they're involved, especially when we look at our LGBTQI+ community, because a lot of the folks that I talk to, they're like, "We aren't going to church. We don't want to be dealing with nobody's church because we've been condemned for so long." Or I get the one, "Deirdre, you're a different Christian than everybody else." Yeah, I am. Because at the center of Christianity is love, and I don't think that God would be like, "Hate this person. Like this person. Hate this person." He wants you to love even your enemies.
- Deirdre Johnson: So some dynamics when you go to different churches and when they get to the bashing part it's just like, well, got to go. Because then you just messed up the whole process of what the whole rhetoric is, and now you've got 1,000 people sitting in your pews. They're just going to go back, "Well, gays are bad." And you're just like, "Seriously? Seriously." Now you get back to... not really for your kids, but you know what I mean? "Only gays get that." But now you're condemned, and then you have a group of folks who believe in spirituality, and now they think God hates me because I'm gay.
- Deirdre Johnson: See? It's how even you... And that's a struggle, too. Because I'm like, "No, not all Christians hate gays. No. Don't even think that way about a least bit." But so then you're changing that because then you don't want to say... I might say "God bless you," and then they be like, "Well, God didn't bless me. I'm gay." Really? Now we've got to go back to square... You know. Baby, just be happy you're alive. Bless your heart. That's my favorite go-to, bless your heart.
- Deirdre Johnson: So, yeah. It's a bigger epidemic than people recognize. And then it might be true, too, that folks then recognize, "Well, if I have to tell you I'm HIV positive, then I also have to tell you that I'm poor. I'm struggling. I may have mental health issues. I might have housing issues. I might have this issue, that issue, and this issue, and I might be selling a little ass on the street just to make ends meet, and maybe pimping my kids out." That's not great, but it does happen. "And selling my pills for whatever [inaudible 01:51:16]."
- Deirdre Johnson: I'm sorry, I'm such a Debbie Downer.
- Speaker 3: It's real.
- Speaker 2: It's a reality check. It's a reality check.
- Deirdre Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. So, but yeah. And don't ever hesitate. Give me a call, email me, whatever. I'm on Facebook. Just the whole nine, just...
- Speaker 2: Thank you.

Deirdre Johnson: Whatever you guys need.

Speaker 3: We will. Thanks.

Speaker 2: Thank you.

Deirdre Johnson: I'm just excited, because at first they told me... They were like, "Oh no, Dee, we're not..." and I was like, "Yay! Go y'all!" And when they were telling me everybody else, what they were going to be doing.

Speaker 2: No, we're so glad that you could-

Deirdre Johnson: And then I was like, "You guys, so excited!" And they were like, "So Deirdre, you're not mad?" I was like, "Mad because you're all about to get the hype of the century? Are you crazy?" No! This is what I have fought... and it's not that I'm tired of being the face, but at the same... I want you guys to step out on your own too, and get into these things.

Speaker 3: Well, speaking of being the face, we're going to have our photographer, Michael Simon, get in touch with you to set up a time for a portrait.

Speaker 2: Great.

Speaker 3: If that's good.

Speaker 2: Yeah. That's...

Deirdre Johnson: That'd be great.

Speaker 2: Last bit of information. [crosstalk 01:52:28]

Deirdre Johnson: I think we took some pictures.

Speaker 2: That's what I was going to ask. He did take a picture, right?

Speaker 3: Oh, perfect. Perfect.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah, check with him, because I do remember taking some pictures with him.

Speaker 2: Perfect, perfect.

Deirdre Johnson: But if you need more, I'm always game.

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Speaker 3: If you took a picture, that's what we were going to ask, if he actually took a pictures.

Deirdre Johnson: Yes.

Speaker 2: So you were there on the day that he came, but were you in the circle when we did the oral history?

Deirdre Johnson: No.

Speaker 2: You had to leave early.

Deirdre Johnson: I wasn't there, because I was out of town.

Speaker 2: Ah.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah, and I think at some point there was something where there was only a certain group of people that were coming for certain parts, and at one point it-

Speaker 2: So he had two photo sessions, then.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah, and we had... The one that I went to was the one at Diversity Thrift.

Speaker 2: Oh.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Deirdre Johnson: Where, because they did the makeup ones or something.

Speaker 3: That's right. That was you and Renee and...

Deirdre Johnson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2: Got it.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Speaker 2: Excellent. So now we know.

Deirdre Johnson: Yeah.

Speaker 2: Perfect. Well-

Speaker 3: Thank you.

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Speaker 2: Thank you so much!

Deirdre Johnson: You're so welcome. You're so welcome. Anything, just don't hesitate. Just...